

Opinion Columns & Blogs

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Charter ruling hurts poorer students



PETTIGREW Washington State Legislative Sup

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In the interest of quid pro quo and tradition, Washington is hurting our children.

On Sept. 4, the night before a long holiday weekend, the state Supreme Court slipped in a ruling rejecting the public charter school law that was approved by voters three years ago.

This decision immediately impacted more than 1,300 students and their families who chose to enroll in public charter schools across the state. That's an entire community of families, teachers and other hardworking school staff disenfranchised overnight.

It's also a direct blow to our country's founding principle of justice and liberty for all. We can't just sit idly by and watch this attack against our most vulnerable and underserved populations.

The children who are bearing the brunt of this aren't from wealthy neighborhoods. No, these kids are primarily children of color, who live in our state's most impoverished communities.

Across our state and all over the country, students of color are not making it in conventional public schools. Black and Latino students make up the largest number of dropouts, face harsher discipline, suffer from language barriers, and deal with the ever-present achievement gap. In my district, we have children of color struggling with these same issues, and more.

To combat this, I look for tools to help make changes, and public charter schools have proven to be effective. No, charters aren't the only answer, but they are an option that could help children find a way out of poverty and onto the right track for the future.

But to have a court order come down at the last second and snatch that opportunity away is a slap in the face to the people we're supposed to be serving. These families just wanted the same quality education as children and families from more affluent backgrounds. Instead, they got a raw deal, under the guise of "unconstitutional."

It incenses me that for the sake of some traditional principle, the court, the union and other traditional education organizations chose to take away what might have been these kids' only shot.

As the only African American legislator in the state, it's disheartening to be leading this battle cry that everyone in the community wanted to be part of, and then when the rubber hits the road, "tradition" steps in. Well guess what? Traditional methods aren't working for our children.

Charters aren't the solution for all students, but they provide an alternative and an opportunity at a better future for children who need it most. To take that away is the same as handing these kids a ticket to poverty, prison or worse.

In America, we base who we are on educational opportunity. No matter who you are, or where you're from, if you can get a quality education, you can be whoever you want to be – even president. If we're not offering that opportunity to every child, then we're not being true to our values. And, if we don't take care of this now, it will come back to bite us all.

I'm not going to give up on this because I'm standing up for children, while standing on the shoulders of all the civil rights leaders and advocates of our nation's history. I ask that Gov. Jay Inslee, and my colleagues in the state Legislature stand with me.

Call a special session to reverse this injustice and keep our schools open.

State Rep. Eric Pettigrew is a Democrat representing the diverse 37th Legislative District in south Seattle.

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